

“Church and the iPod Generation”
Texts: Jeremiah 1:4-10, Acts 20:7-12
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“Meanwhile, they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.”
Acts 20:12

The writer David Brooks had a fascinating column in the New York Times several weeks ago titled, “The Power of Posterity.” In it, he envisioned a world with no future. What would happen if those living on earth today learned that they were the final generation? The effects would be devastating. Brooks writes, “without posterity, there are no grand designs. There are no high ambitions. Politics becomes insignificant. Even words like justice lose meaning because everything gets reduced to the narrow qualities of the here and now.” And then Brooks writes this pithy sentence: “Anything worth doing is the work of generations.”ⁱ

I recently heard the great preacher Fred Craddock, who just celebrated his 81st birthday, proclaim that, of all the great heroes of history, the person he most admires is the cathedral worker. Many of the great European cathedrals took over century to build, and Craddock imagines the mason cutting the rock for the cornerstone of a massive building that he will never see completed in his lifetime. What these wise people knew, Craddock continues, is that their great grandchildren would worship in the cathedral that they began. Ours is a faith that looks forward, to the generations that will follow. All of you who have worked tirelessly and contributed generously to the mission and ministries of this congregation over the years know the importance of preparing for those who have not arrived, of asking the question, “who is not yet here, who is not yet welcome?”

There is a crisis in the church today. It is not a crisis of faith or funding. No, ours is a crisis of the future. Those born since 1982, sometimes called the iPod Generation, or the millennials, are mostly not in our churches. According to a study published this summer, 70% of young people leave the church by age 22. The Barna Group estimates that the number increases to 80% by age 30. The top reasons for the high dropout rate are not surprising. A perception of the church as judgmental and hypocritical. Busy schedules that simply don't leave time for church. No strong feeling of connection with others who attend church. Spiritual needs not fulfilled by conventional religious institutions.ⁱⁱ Common perceptions among those born since 1982.

As one born in that pivotal year, I can tell you that my profession puzzles many of my peers. I'll never forget the amount of curiosity and confusion that came from my colleagues in college when I announced that I would be going to seminary. They were happy for me, but in a polite, “isn't that nice” kind of way. Deeper down, there was great suspicion about this choice. Like many members of the iPod generation, they had been

raised in a world where religion and the Christian church were simply not a consistent part of their lives. They were caring, kind, compassionate people who didn't seem to need the church to make them moral. Religious community was not an evil institution so much as it was a relic of bygone times, a fossil left behind from the days of our grandparents. For many of us raised on Nickelodeon, Nintendo, and Ninja Turtles, the church simply lacked the ability to engage and captivate us.

In the brief account of a boy named Eutychus in the Book of Acts, we find perhaps a First Century corollary to the experience of many young persons in our churches. Paul has been preaching since just before noon, and it is now midnight (a twelve hour sermon!). The young Eutychus, whose name ironically translates "Lucky," is perched in a windowsill and has reached the limit of his attention span. The author of Acts seems to be chuckling as he writes the next phrase, "Eutychus began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer." Finally, Eutychus falls asleep and out of the window, to his death.

It is at this point that the miracle takes place. Paul takes a break from his sermon. That's the miracle! He goes downstairs and takes the young man in his arms. There is life in him yet. Paul pauses to engage Eutychus and revives the life still within him.

It's an odd and even amusing story, tucked away in the accounts of Paul's preaching journeys. But, if we look deeper, it is also a story of importance for the cathedral builders of our time and for the future of the church.

I think we find a clue of this in the opening phrase of the passage, "On the first day of the week." In the New Testament, this is more than a time marker or note in the calendar. The phrase is an allusion to another event that took place on the first day of the week. It hearkens back to Easter morning when the women discovered an empty tomb and a God on the loose in the world. The first day of the week is the day of resurrection, and this is a resurrection story. The story is a description of what happens every time the church gathers to worship God. Resurrection is a part of the mission of the church. As Will Willimon writes, "there is something about this God that just loves to wake people up, shake people up, raise people up."ⁱⁱⁱ

The church is at its best when it is on the move, looking and pointing beyond itself to the places where God is leading us forward. Resurrection happens when the church refuses to stay in the tombs of history and instead ventures out into the world.

For the sake of the church's future and for the sake of the iPod generation, we must clear our collective throats and regain a voice in the conversations taking place all around us. It is not an effective or faithful strategy for the church to simply say NO to every innovation and change taking place all around us. Such dogmatic resistance merely silences our voice. And ours is a voice so necessary in this time. Reaching the iPod generation is going to take bold faith in the resurrection power of God still at work in the world.

As we seek to pursue this mission with renewed vision, I believe we must steer clear of two temptations. The first is to concur with the culture of narcissism that daily assaults young people. Churches that cater to the self-centeredness of our culture miss the gospel imperative of self-denial and Christ-centeredness. The other, opposite temptation is to join the loud, prominent Christian voices of fear and judgment. To feel powerful by condemning others, forgetting that the grace of God covers all.

As the peers of Eutychus fall out of windows throughout the American religious landscape, we owe it to the future to articulate a different kind of faith. One that offers a theology of transcendent truth **and** humble open-mindedness.

After his prophetic commissioning as a youth, Jeremiah spends his entire life's energy calling the people of Israel to get their words and actions in proper alignment. Jeremiah's frustration is that those who call themselves religious are leaving their faith at the door of the sanctuary. They are self-righteous and ostentatious in worship but fail to live out the ethical commands of their theology. They preach justice but do not live justly. For Jeremiah, as for young people in our time, such hypocrisy devastates the message. For many in the iPod generation, the hypocrisy of Christians who preach love and practice hatred is the largest hindrance to participation in the church. To reach this generation, we will need to get our worship and work in proper alignment. This is beginning to happen in Christian communities like this one and in places all over the world, but there is much work to be done in countering the highly publicized and deeply hurtful response of some of our fellow Christians. We must articulate a theology of grace, of inclusion, of mercy, of love, if we are to reach those who know too well the depiction of Christianity offered by shouting televangelists, and parodied by George Carlin and Bill Maher. We must raise the visibility of a different kind of Christianity.

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread. From the story of Eutychus, we can learn the value of ritual and community in reaching the next generation. I recently read a fascinating account of how, in the absence of meaningful worship, young people are discovering spiritual experiences in secular places. Sports arenas and political rallies; hospital rooms and movie theaters. Perhaps most palpably at rock concerts. You heard that right. Many members of the iPod generation describe going to a concert in almost explicitly religious terms. It is a feeling of transcendence in community.^{iv} Of being a part of something larger and more significant than yourself. Members of the iPod generation are fatigued by a culture that has no respect for transcendence. The narcissism fed by a culture of excess has not met our deepest needs, and so many of my peers are searching.

I can think of no better reason for any of us to be part of a church community than to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that the world does not revolve around us. As the children in our mission camp this summer learned, "It's not all about me." The experience of Eutychus, who was raised from the dead in the middle of a worship service, points to the centrality of worship as we seek to reach those who are not a part of our churches. Worship is the most important act of a Christian community. No matter what else we

may do together, if we fail to worship and instruct the coming generations in the power and holiness of worship, we will not pass on a meaningful faith.

Unless we communicate a sense of transcendence, our churches become mere social clubs for likeminded individuals. The iPod generation, I assure you, can see through such transparent shallowness. The future of the church depends on communities of commitment to God and to the world that God created and loves. It depends on churches that instruct and guide young people to lead Christ-centered and selfless lives, to contribute to the welfare of the world **because** of our Christian faith. We must transcend the divisions between conservative and liberal, traditional and contemporary, Bible-believing and social-justice minded. Accomplishing the great purposes of the church leads us beyond such dualistic thinking and into community. And reaching out to the iPod generation will demand unity that is embodied, not simply professed.

While I was in college, I had the wonderfully unusual opportunity to preach weekly for a small church in a small town in North Carolina. The members of the church were mostly elderly folk who had grown up in the town and whose children had moved away in search of a more fast-paced life. I would often travel the two hours north on Sunday mornings along with my best friend and summer roommate. David would serve as liturgist and I would preach. One week, we decided to drive up on Saturday afternoon and spend the night with the matriarch of the congregation, Mrs. Ann Bell. Mrs. Bell could best be described as an unbending traditionalist. She loved old hymns, hard pews, and Bible-based preaching. Above all, she believed in worship that was formal and proper, reflecting the majesty of God.

Well, that evening as we were preparing for worship, David discovered that he had neglected to pack dress pants. Actually, he discovered that he had neglected to pack any pants, and had only the shorts he was wearing. I thought of telling Mrs. Bell and began to sweat. I walked downstairs and explained the situation. Mrs. Bell looked straight ahead and was silent for a full minute. I kept sweating. "Well, I suppose it's okay" she finally said, "David came all this way to do it. God doesn't care what we wear to church. Let the ladies talk to me if they have a problem with it." It was a moment of extraordinary grace. I do not believe that David became a Presbyterian Minister solely because of that moment. But when this member of the greatest generation, a pillar of traditionalism, opened the door to an iPod-listening, shorts-wearing friend one-quarter her age, I believe the Spirit of God was on the move, transcending all that separated them.

Transcendence. It's what we experience on this first day of the week when we meet to break bread. John Calvin said that, in communion, Christians are lifted into the presence of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is larger and more significant than us, for it is a sharing in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. At this table, we find ourselves united with all the faithful of every time and place, and we join the work of the kingdom of God in the world. At this table, we have our priorities realigned and our sins forgiven. We are given the strength needed to build cathedrals that will stand and serve those who follow us. We are given the gifts of new life and new opportunity.

I can promise you this. The grace of God will outlast any trend and cross all boundaries. This is good news. For God's sake, go tell someone about it!

In the name of the One who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

ⁱ David Brooks, "The Power of Posterity." The New York Times, July 27, 2009. Also accessible at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/opinion/28brooks.html>.

ⁱⁱ More information on the study can be found at <http://www.christiansincontext.org/2009/09/book-review-rethink-is-student-ministry.html>. The study itself can be found at www.barna.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ William H. Willimon, "Lucky to Be Here" preached on August 29, 2004 at Duke Chapel. This was Bishop Willimon's final sermon as Dean of Duke Chapel and I was privileged to hear it.

^{iv} See the article at <http://ow.ly/nlW0> for more information.